

V. S. NAIPAUL'S ARTISTIC SKILL IN PRESENTING FACT AND EXPERIENCE THROUGH SELF-ANALYSIS AND SELF- MONITORING OF RESPONSES AS REVEALED IN HIS *AN AREA OF DARKNESS*

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received: **13 Dec 2017;**

Received in revised form:
29 Dec 2017;

Accepted: **29 Dec 2017;**

Published online: **10 Jan 2018.**

Key words:

Leading Novelist,
Coveted Place,
Brilliant Interpreter,
Artistic Skill,
Post-Colonialism,
Fact and Experience,
Self-Analysis,
Response,
Steadfast.

ABSTRACT

This paper projects V. S. Naipaul as the leading novelist of the English-speaking Caribbean projecting the problem of an outsider, a feature of his own experience as an Indian in the West Indies, a West Indian in England and a nomadic intellectual in a post-colonial world. It reflects Naipaul's artistic skill in presenting fact and experience through self-analysis and self-monitoring of responses with particular reference to his *An Area of Darkness*.

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INTRODUCTION

Being indelibly associated with colonial and Post-colonial realism, V. S. Naipaul is a leading novelist of the English-speaking Caribbean island. Occupying a coveted place among the most celebrated twentieth century writers interrogating post-imperial realities, he has carved a niche for himself as “an observer of the problems of the Third and a brilliant interpreter of the difficulties faced by the diaspora” (Rajalakshmi 1). Being an Indian uprooted from the land of his ancestors, he is a West Indian by birth and upbringing. Writing was an obsession with Naipaul right from his early days. The decision to be a writer involved long labour with all the accompanying penalties of solitude. He has never been anything but a writer and he has always lived only by writer.

Cite this article as: Chelliah, S., “V.S.Naipaul's Artistic Skill in Presenting Fact and Experience Through Self-analysis and Self-monitoring of Responses as Revealed in His *An Area of Darkness*”. *International Journal of Advanced Scientific Research & Development (IJASRD)*, 04 (12/I), 2017, 01 – 05. <https://doi.org/10.26836/ijasrd/2017/v4/i12/41201>.

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Generally speaking, to the post-colonial writers, literature served an important purpose – a means of protest. It is a protest against inequities, oppression and a focus on the loss of a culture and heritage eroded by colonization and the brutality meted out to them. The prime concern of post-colonial literature in English is “historical and cultural differences, place displacement and a pervasive concern with the myths of identity and authenticity” (Ashcroft 9). As a post-colonial writer, V.S. Naipaul holds a place of eminence among the most distinguished novelists in English of the twentieth century:

“born to the limited hopes and narrow horizons of an impoverished colonial existence, heir by conquest – conquered, not conqueror – of only one great and powerful weapon or talisman by means of which, with luck, perseverance, and talent, he might elude the mediocrity and frustration that had constructed his father’s life – that was V.S.Naipaul and the English language was his weapon or talisman” (Gottfried 440).

Though Naipaul’s ambition to become a writer was steadfast, it opened up a plethora of problems:

“In my fantasy of being a writer there had been no idea how I might actually go about writing a book. I suppose – I couldn’t be sure – that there was a vague notion in the fantasy that once I had done the first the others would follow. In those early days every new book meant facing the old blankness again... my writing imagination was like a chalk-scrawled blackboard, wiped clean in stages and at the end blank again.” (RW 27-28).

The involvement of Naipaul in the art of writing his ardent love for writers and his cherished respect for the image of the writer is a challenging subject. The idea of writing and emerging successful in this field overwhelms his soul and spirit totally. In his talk with Bernard Levin in 1983, he reveals his attitude towards writing:

“... at really quite an early age, I thought of myself as a writer. It was just something that was given to me as a fantasy of nobility, a fantasy of the good life, the beautiful life, the civilized life. I became a writer because of this overwhelming idea of its nobility as a calling” (94).

Travelogues in general focus on the geoscape of the places visited by the writers. There are a few classics of the twentieth century travel-writing – Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Amateur Emigrant* and Melville’s *Typee*, Norman Lewis’s *Golden Earth* and Graham Greene’s *Journey Without Maps*. The commonwealth Woodcock’s *Asia, Gods and Cities*, Michael Ondaatje’s *Running in the Family*, J. M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians*, V. S. Naipaul’s *An Area of Darkness* are the works that stand on par with the best travel writing. As stated earlier, Naipaul had an imaginative account of the Indian experience in Trinidad. When he visited India, he was burdened by colonial prejudices and disappointment. The realization, that the disappointment in the recognition of colonialism and the new world had stripped him of the capability of contentment there. This realization is the subject of *An Area of Darkness*.

The novel *An Area of Darkness* is partly an autobiography and partly a travelogue genre. Naipaul writes about his experiences in India over span of one year and it is written in the first person narrative voice and Naipaul uses descriptive passages very well to outline his themes. The very title “An Area of Darkness” refers to India and many of the

negative aspects of Indian culture are highlighted and Naipaul seems to have seen the whole bleakness of the culture at every stage. Colonialism is an important issue in the story and again this is treated with a good deal of ironic detachment. Towards the conclusion of the story, Naipaul acknowledges that he should never really have returned to the country:

*"It was a journey that ought not to have been made;
it had broken my life into"* (**Area of Darkness** 265)

The story abounds with descriptions of the extreme poverty of India. Naipaul describes India as the poorest country in the world'. The Indians defecate everywhere but fail to face up to this fact according to Naipaul. He analyses in a very logical way of reasons why he thinks poverty exists in such a real way in India and mentions at one stage how 'divorce of the intellect from physical labour has made of us the most resourceless and most exploited nation on earth. Naipaul writes:

*".... the man who makes the dingy led in the
hotel room will be affronted if he is asked
to sweep the gritty floor. The clerk will not
bring you a glass of water even if you faint"* (P 47).

The concluding section abounds in grim and rather depressing images of poverty. When Naipaul pays a trip to the village and needs the emaciated Ramachandra who is surrounded in dire poverty he is appalled and simply wants to leave the country at once. Naipaul speaks a good deal about the caste system. He describes it as the brutal division of labour and something which is unpleasant. He reveals how the caste system only imprisons a man in his function and makes so many people anonymous and faceless. The Indians who are born overseas are not accepted by the system and have no identity. Naipaul devotes one section of his book to speaking about the works that Gandhi carried out for his country. He tried to attack the psychology underlying the caste system and to show that there was dignity in man and a need to clean and have proper sanitation methods. Naipaul feels that Gandhi failed to get this message across. One section of the novel is devoted to this time. He mentions at one stage how the country only pretends to be colonial:

*"Yesterday the country's mimicry was Mogul, tomorrow
it could be Russian or American".*

He concludes by stating that the Indian English mimicry is like fantasy. When the British withdrew completely from India, something of fantasy remained attached to their presence there. He draws compassion between Colonial India and Colonial Trinidad.

The story is a semi-autobiographical account given by Naipaul of a year he spent in India in 1964. The opening section entitled "Travellers Prelude" deals with the difficulties surrounding bureaucracy in the country. Naipaul speaks about how he made many difficult efforts to recover alcohol that was confiscated from him. The book is divided into three parts. Part one is entitled "A Resting place for the Imagination" where he speaks about his ancestors coming to India as indentured labourers, and he also deals with his first experiences on the issue of race, of Muslims and Hindus, whereas 'Part Two' opens with the image of a Doll's House on the Dal Lake which is in fact a hotel called Hotel Liward, where he speaks about his relationships with the various people who worked in the hotel and the ensuing conflicts which occurred and Part Three is entitled "Fantasy and Ruins" which deals with how the British possessed the country completely. He goes on to speak about writers and how Indian attempts at the novel reveal the Indian confusion further and he

moves on to speak about Indian railways and how he befriended a Sikh while travelling by train South India. He comes to the conclusion however, that India for him remains an area of darkness. *An Area of Darkness* is considered to be one of the "full-fledged India" books, which is a homage as well as protest, memory as well as denial, disillusion as well as dirge. Naipaul continuously tries to impose his personalised, romanticised image of India on the reality and when the reality militates against his pre-conceived notion, he allows his narrative to slip into an exercise in banter, unwarranted moralising and misplaced criticism.

Too often does Naipaul say that he had abstracted from the scene as it was distasteful or incomprehensible to him. He felt that there is something of darkness in attitude, way of thinking and seeing which would be no longer his. The tension between imagination and reality is a strong feature of the book *An Area of Darkness*. While describing Delhi, Naipaul writes:

"A city whose emblematic grandeur spoke of a rich and settled hinterland and not of the poor, parched land through which they had been travelling for twenty four hours" (P 93)

One is tempted to ask whether Naipaul is unknowingly adopting the accepted notion that India is to be defined wholly by its poverty, for he considers whatever appears affluent as either corrupt or westernized. As stated earlier, Naipaul stated his journey with high impression about India. Those high impressions were developed by their ancestors' way of life. They followed the Indian custom and culture strictly. So he had developed an image of India with rich culture and tradition. But when he travelled throughout India, he realized all his imaginative impressions were contradictory to the Indian way of life. Such contradictions are clearly states in the chapter entitled as "Fantasy and Ruins":

"The Taj Mahal may speak only of personal plunder and a country with an infinite capacity to be plundered but it cannot be seen apart from the cycles rickshaw men's straining limbs" (P206)

Naipaul's pain at seeing the wounds of India causes the same dismay and anger which are an integral part of the migrant's perspective for it contains both nationalist's desire and the colonialist's zeal. While analyzing Naipaul's *An Area of Darkness*, critics called it a travelogue describing his journey to the Home of his ancestors, revealing his deep antipathy for the immensity and chaos of the country, the sloth and simplicity of its citizens, the stranglehold of tradition, the display of religiosity, the corruption of its rulers. But the novel is also a self-analysis and self-monitoring response going on incessantly as we read through it. Naipaul's prejudices of the self determine and limit understanding so that travelogue becomes revelation of the writer's self, his prejudices, his inability to enter into the spirit of land or gain an insight of it. The reader would be amazed to note that even the section on Kashmir (Part –II) does not evoke any warmth of response from the traveler.

Historical information, detailed descriptions of day-to-day discomforts in the hotel where he stays, comments of elemental Hindu rituals and religion, descriptions of flagellants in religious frenzy and the pilgrimage to Amarnath are rendered in a detached and critical tone without any emotional involvement. While describing the pilgrimage to Amarnath, Naipaul writes:

“Indians were exuberant and aggressive as if they had seen god. They were unwilling to give way. They shouted Jai-Shankar” (AAD 167)

His visit to the ancestral home in the village of the Dubes and his concluding remarks on India reveals Naipaul’s self-analysis thus:

“India had not worked its magic on me. It remained the land of my childhood, an area of darkness, like the Himalayan passes, it was closing up again, as fast as I withdrew from it into a land of myth; it seemed to exist in just the timelessness which I had imagined as a child into which for all that I walked on Indian earth I knew I could not penetrate” (P 252).

Naipaul’s self, caged and distanced by its own prejudice fails to achieve any relationship of significance during his one year tour in India. Relationships turn sour or exist precariously on the verge of collapse. The relationship with Aziz in the hotel on Dal Lake never runs smooth. The first person narration brings forth to the idea of self. He writes:

*“In India, I had so far felt myself a visitor.
Its size, its temperature, its crowds;
I had prepared myself for these, but in its
very extremes the country was alien” (AAD 140)*

In this way, the self-analysis and self-monitoring of responses go on incessantly as he moves through the area of darkness. Naipaul’s manner is more serious and there is an increasing attraction to and resistance against traditional Indian passivity and fatalism. His year in India marked a major crisis in his life by revealing there would be no return to his origins. Feeling unsettled, unrooted he began questioning his life and the life of being a writer. What was he really writing about – society, his past, himself, the artist, the world, the relationship of art to what? because of such concerns, the novel ***An Area of Darkness*** has become derisively layered with a variety of significances, many levels of meaning ranging from the autobiographical to the philosophical.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the novel ***An Area of Darkness*** tells the story of a struggle for self-assertion, its excitements, rages, passion, problems, irritations, defeats and concludes, sometimes triumphantly, sometimes with frustrations, with ambivalence towards the worth of the struggle. Naipaul keeps questioning the worth of struggle to achieve and leave a mark on the world. Naipaul has a unique style in describing the events and fixing up the conversations. His chosen vocabulary and narration have proved Naipaul to be a significant writer in the field of Indian English literature.

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